

Motivated to Work: The Power of Choice Boards

by LAURA LODER BUECHEL

Those of you with children might recognize the phenomenon of *something* getting done when you ask, “Are you going to clean your room *or* the bathroom today?” and *nothing* getting done when you say, “Clean your room today.” It’s the same in the classroom—giving learners a choice often leads them to do something instead of nothing. This can be simple: “You can do Exercise 5, or you can do Exercise 6.” Even better, though, are choice boards.

Suppose you would like your learners to work on expanding and reviewing their vocabulary. All the learners could perhaps create an acrostic, but why limit it to everyone having to do the same thing? Perhaps some learners are more analytical, others like lists, and others just need to focus on spelling. The idea behind choice boards—sometimes called tic-tac-toe boards—is that you give learners a few options (see Choice Board 1) and have them choose three activities in a row (across, up and down, or diagonally), as in tic-tac-toe. In the worst case, a learner finishes one option; in the best case, some entrepreneurial learner does all nine options. Most learners, however, will do at least the three that they have chosen—because they *chose* to do them.

CHOICE BOARDS FOR DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION

Tomlinson (2014, 20) writes that “teachers can differentiate through” the following:

- Content (the information and ideas students grapple with to reach the learning goals);
- Process (how students take in and make sense of the content);
- Product (how students show what they know, understand, and can do); and
- Affect/Environment (the climate or tone of the classroom) according to a student’s readiness, interests, and learning profile.

Theisen (2002) picks up on this notion and provides examples, also of choice boards, in world-language classrooms because choice boards can cover pretty much all of Tomlinson’s points. Among the reasons choice boards are useful are the following:

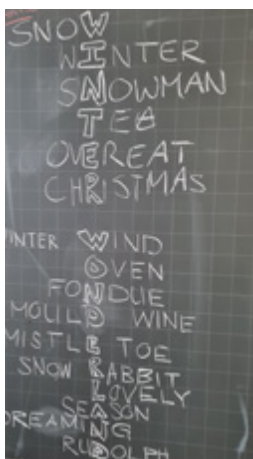
- They allow learners to determine what they themselves would like to focus on.
- They help learners to become independent managers of time, as learners have to plan what they can do in the time allocated to working with the board.
- They help learners become decision-makers and take charge of their own learning, as many examples can be generalized to other topics.
- They often allow for more creativity than just having students complete coursebook activities linearly.

- Choice boards help with planning and regularity in a class, contributing to a positive classroom environment, or organizational scaffolding from which many learners profit. A structure that often works for me in a 45-minute lesson with 10- to 12-year-old children is as follows:

Choice Board 1: Winter Words

Winter Acrostic!

Using "Winter Wonderland,"
write an acrostic!



Shape Art!

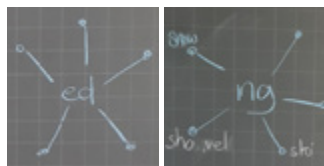
Draw your favorite winter scene, but use words and sentences!



Snowflake Words!

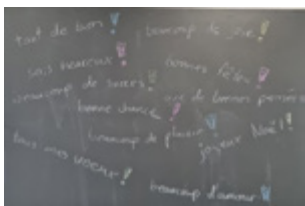
Create snowflake words
with the language below
in the middle:

- ... ing
- ... ed
- snow
- cold
- winter



Send Warm Wishes!

On the board, write as many nice wishes as you can think of to your classmates for the new year!



ABC List!

Take a nice piece of paper and cut it out in the shape of a sled or snowperson. Now write an ABC list of winter words on there, first in pencil, then in pen after your teacher has checked it!

Word Shapes!

Look at the list of winter words in your book. With at least 10 of them, draw the word shape. Leave it in the front of the room for another student to fill in!



Make a Winter Word Cloud!



Go through your book.
Write any word that you can
associate with winter into the
word cloud!

Find Words!

What words can you spell
from the letters in ...
WINTER WONDERLAND?

List them! You can only use each letter as many times as it appears in "Winter Wonderland"!

Create Cards!

Choose 5 to 10 winter words that you think are difficult to remember or spell. For each one, make a Frayer card.



- 5 minutes: Bell-ringer on the board (e.g., a tongue twister or joke)
- 10 minutes: Controlled activity with the entire class (grammar review? short video? spelling game?)
- 10 minutes: Quiet work on the choice board
- 10 minutes: Partner work on the choice board
- 10 minutes: Sharing and celebrating work and planning next steps

With this structure, I can start lessons with something fun, then pick up on an issue I noticed needed some work from the previous lesson or a topic from the coursebook that needs direct instruction. Then I move into the open work, the choice boards, which can steer the content, the process, and the products that the learners create, all important in differentiated instruction.

In Choice Board 1, learners can decide what to do but also which words to work with. If, as is often the case in the classroom, you have some learners who speak English at home and some who don't, you can use different word lists for different learners, take away the models/scaffolds on the board, more stringently correct certain work, or offer an alternative choice board with a focus on sentences. In my experience, a simple vocabulary choice board like this is open enough for every learner at every language level to contribute; thus, it takes their readiness and interests into account.

Choice Board 2 is based on working with a nonfiction text; the basis could also be a story or a short video. It is possible with such a choice board to work with two different texts. In this example, you could take two of the same texts about Pancake Day from Newsela or adapt a text with ChatGPT on differing Lexile or Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) levels—or

Choice Board 2: Based on a text about Pancake Day (search on iSLCollective)		
Scanning – Laser eyes Make an alphabetical (ABC) list of all the countries listed in the text! Find them on the map and write down their neighboring countries. Go through the text again. List all the numbers and note what they are about.	Vocabulary development – Look it up! Choose 5 words you do not know. Look them up on dictionary.com in English. Write the word, your guess, and the definition in your notebook or make a Frayer card for each word!	Expansion – Carnival? Write 5 sentences about the Carnival celebration in Switzerland or a similar holiday in your village. Where is it? What do people do? What is unique about this celebration? Why is there Carnival?
Gist – Captions Under each of the pictures, write one sentence in English that describes what the picture shows.	Strategies – Big Fox Fill in the BIG FOX about the text!	Pronunciation – Read it out loud Read the text out loud to a partner or on your iPad (record yourself). Do this until you feel confident!
Gist – Summarize the text in German In 5 good German sentences, describe what the text is about. Or if you can: Retell it to your teacher/senior in school/neighbor!	Reduction – Hashtag it! What is this text about? Make a list of 5 hashtags that best summarize the text. Give them to your friend. Listen to your friend explain what they mean!	Visualizing language – Picture this! Match the pictures to the parts of the text they match. Add at least four new pictures to the text.

Choice Board 3: Based on a coursebook unit for Swiss primary-school learners in their third year of learning English

 Conversation with a forester Use Peaksay and practice until you Win the Battle! https://www.peaksay.com/classes/63c8ffb618b6ef7893a0c4a/join	 Practice the telephone game 0 pair 1 pear 2 bird 3 beard 4 food 5 foot 6 owl 7 all 8 leave 9 leaf Give your phone number to your partner, for example "pair – food – food," and your partner writes down the numbers (044). Swap roles.	 Two truths and a lie Using the SIMPLE PRESENT tense, write two truths and a lie about nocturnal animals! • Owls sleep at night. • Bears sleep during the day. • Squirrels never sleep. Add these to the envelope. Test yourself with the ones that are there!
 Describe the picture Choose a picture from the unit. Write 10 sentences using the PRESENT CONTINUOUS tense! For example (page 35): • The squirrels are chatting. • The woman is holding a tree. More? Add adverbs and adjectives to your sentences! • The squirrels are chatting agitatedly! • The middle-aged woman is holding a pear tree.	 Unique treehouses Search for pictures of "unique" or "cool" treehouses. Choose one you think looks great. Glue it to a piece of paper. Then write! • Describe it: It is made of ... / It has ... • What do you see in the picture? There is/are ... • Why do you like this? I like it because ... • What would you do in your treehouse?	 A walk in the forest Play the game on page 50 with a partner.
 DOs and DON'Ts Think of a place (the pool? your grandparents' house?). Make a list of things you should NOT do there and things you SHOULD do there (6 DON'Ts, 6 DOs). Don't show your partner where you are! Write the DOs and DON'Ts. Then read them to your partner. Your partner guesses where you are!	 Read <i>The Giving Tree</i> Read <i>The Giving Tree</i> out loud. Rewrite the story in your own words (at least 8 sentences). Then make two lists: (1) what we get from branches and (2) what we can make with apples.	 Record yourself Do page 44. Record yourself reading out loud. Send it to your teacher when you are happy with it!

Choice boards, by nature, are excellent means of providing differentiated instruction, and the examples provided here can be adapted to any age or topic.

you can choose two different texts, but on the same topic, from iSLCollective where there is a filter for the CEFR level. It could also be useful to have two separate choice boards for such work, one with easier activities requiring learners to produce less language and/or fewer sentences, and one with more-difficult activities on it, where learners are expected to produce more.

Choice Boards 3 and 4 are based on coursebooks used in Swiss schools; these examples show how some of the coursebook activities might be used, while others were deemed not necessary. The teacher wanted to work more authentically and with the larger aims of learning but without the books in order to offer differentiated, open instruction and creativity. Choice Board 3 integrates some of the coursebook aims (in the context of “forests,” the present simple and negations are taught). The story of *The Giving Tree* (Silverstein 1964) is mentioned here because an adaptation is included in the coursebook, but the original story is just as easy and more authentic.

We see in this example various foci, from phonemic awareness to grammar, as well as individual and group work or pair work. Furthermore, pair work is placed in the board in such a way that no learner could choose *only* to do pair work (there is only one such instance in each row, so that learners cannot choose three in a row with *only* group work, as this might be their only selection criteria). In this case, it was difficult to decide whether each learner should at least do one grammar activity or if it was more important that they did not choose only group work due to management issues.

Choice Board 4 is also based on a coursebook but makes the learners work strategically to focus more on process and strategies and less on “just doing” the coursebook exercises.

If your coursebook has an end-of-unit test, you can use choice boards diagnostically to start the unit so you know where learners have to focus. You can create a choice board with practice on the language that the learners did not yet master from the book, mixed in with open, creative activities, or activities adapted for another focus (such as reading a transcript out loud instead of doing a listening activity). Students can retake the test after choice-board work, or the choice-board products could be used as evidence of learning. The activities that are computer-based here could easily be used in pair work if no computers are available.

Learning Menu 1 illustrates how Choice Board 3 has been turned into a menu students use to complete more activities; the activities are ranked by the teacher as more or less important. Note that learners have to complete *both* main courses. Teachers could easily adapt the main course for different learners by offering two versions of this menu, whereby the main course is easier (or more difficult).

What is done with learner products is another step that can lead to learners expanding on, understanding, or appreciating each other’s work. Sharing work also expands learners’ repertoire of language and social skills and embraces the power of “not one correct answer,” but creative interpretations. Choice boards, by nature, are excellent means of providing differentiated instruction, and the examples provided here can be adapted to any age or topic.

HOW TO INTRODUCE CHOICE BOARDS TO YOUR CLASS

For some classes, especially those with elementary school children, choice boards need an introduction. It is useful to start

simply, such as with Choice Board 1 on vocabulary. You can use each of the activities on the board as an isolated activity whereby everybody does everything. In this case, the model activities could be based on another season, perhaps autumn. Then, when winter comes, you can repeat the activities in the form of a choice board with different language, appropriate for the season. By now, everyone is familiar with the concept, and they can just do the work. Alternatively, some teachers may prefer to introduce a choice board in local language-arts instruction and then use a similar one in English lessons.

When you use a choice board for the first time, upon handing it out, have the learners quietly read through the options. They can help each other understand the choices, as this

is also an exercise in reading comprehension. Afterwards, learners can prioritize the three in a row they would like to do with a 1, 2, and 3—or prioritize all of the activities from 1 to 9 if you want them all done. Another idea is to have learners estimate how much time their top activities will take so they learn to think about this, even if their time estimations do not match reality. This type of time estimation is related to time management and is part of learning.

I find it useful to say that the first time slot of a lesson allocated to choice-board work (in other words, if you have a 20-minute slot in the lesson, then the first 10 minutes) must be for individual quiet options, while the second part can be for pair work. Sometimes I use a randomizer to form pairs for the day, with pairs changing each day so that the usual

Choice Board 4: Using the coursebook for Swiss middle-school learners in their fifth year of English (14- to 15-year-olds) selectively

Record yourself reading one of the texts out loud (page 54 or 55) until you are happy with the result. Then use the speech-to-text dictation function on OneNote and see if what the computer recognizes is the text you see on those pages.	Write 6 questions based on pages 56–57. When you are done, your teacher should correct them. Then rewrite each question on a slip of paper and put it in the quiz jar.	Go to https://search.azlyrics.com/ and search for "There might" and "It could" and "There must be." Use "Lyrics results" and write down two lines for each structure from some songs. Do you know those songs?
Copy the postcard on page 63 onto a sheet of paper but leave 15 gaps. Let a classmate fill in the gaps (without opening their book). You do the same! Read one of the gap-fills out loud, filling in the words as you go.	Choose 10 words you want to learn. Make a Frayer card for each one.	 Work with a partner. Try to remember the conversation on page 66. Record yourselves!
 Write 5 questions from the transcript used in Checkpoint A, Step 2. Then play a game with your friend who has done the same thing. Read a question to your partner. If they get it right, they roll the die and get the points. Swap roles.	Look at page 65. Take one example and write it out.	Type the full sentences from the language review on page 58 into a OneNote file. Record yourself reading the sentences out loud and use the Immersive Reader function to help until you are happy with what you hear.

Learning Menu 1: Choice Board 3 adapted as a learning menu

Appetizers – Choose 2!	Main Course – Do both!	Desserts – Choose 2!
 <u>Conversation with a forester</u> Use Peaksay and practice until you Win the Battle! https://www.peaksay.com/classes/63c8ffba618b6ef7893a0c4a/join	 <u>Describe the picture</u> Choose a picture from the unit. Write 10 sentences using the PRESENT CONTINUOUS tense! For example (page 35): • The squirrels are chatting. • The woman is holding a tree. More? Add adverbs and adjectives to your sentences! • The squirrels are chatting agitatedly! • The middle-aged woman is holding a pear tree.	 <u>Practice the telephone game</u> 0 pair 1 pear 2 bird 3 beard 4 food 5 foot 6 owl 7 all 8 leave 9 leaf Give your phone number to your partner, for example "pair – food – food," and your partner writes down the numbers (044). Swap roles.
 <u>A walk in the forest</u> Play the game on page 50 with a partner.	 <u>Two truths and a lie</u> Using the SIMPLE PRESENT tense, write two truths and a lie about nocturnal animals! • Owls sleep at night. • Bears sleep during the day. • Squirrels never sleep. Add these to the envelope. Test yourself with the ones that are there!	 <u>Unique treehouses</u> Search for pictures of "unique" or "cool" treehouses. Choose one you think looks great. Glue it to a piece of paper. Then write! • Describe it: It is made of ... / It has ... • What do you see in the picture? There is/are ... • Why do you like this? I like it because ... • What would you do in your treehouse?
 <u>Read <i>The Giving Tree</i></u> Read <i>The Giving Tree</i> out loud. Rewrite the story in your own words (at least 8 sentences). Then make two lists: (1) what we get from branches and (2) what we can make with apples.		 <u>Record yourself</u> Do page 44. Record yourself reading out loud. Send it to your teacher when you are happy with it!
 <u>DOs and DON'Ts</u> Think of a place (the pool? your grandparents' house?). Make a list of things you should NOT do there and things you SHOULD do there (6 DON'Ts, 6 DOs). Don't show your partner where you are! Write the DOs and DON'Ts. Then read them to your partner. Your partner guesses where you are!		

It is best to clearly state, or write on the board, how many activities students are expected to do in what time frame and to use an hourglass or other timer so learners manage their time.

suspects don't have a chance of misbehaving when lessons are more open, and so that learners learn to work with different people.

It is best to clearly state, or write on the board, how many activities students are expected to do in what time frame and to use an hourglass or other timer so learners manage their time. Sometimes what a learner wants to do the most will not fit into the allotted time, and this is a valuable learning moment—to plan on doing what one has time for or to break up the activity into parts.

At the end of the lesson, you can have the learners take out a Post-it sticker and mark on their board where they will start the next lesson; they can also write a to-do list for the next lesson on this Post-it. If you have learners using interactive or paper notebooks, they can put their work in those, and you can regularly collect them to check how well they are doing, allow time later for revisions, and perhaps even use the products for grading if you have to.

CONCLUSION

When you are creating choice boards, think about the needs, interests, and skills of learners in your classroom so that you have a selection of activities that support a range of these things. If spelling is a difficulty, then be sure to include many spelling activities but in creative ways to account for learners' interests or ages (for example, by asking them to make shape poetry). If you have learners who are excited about graffiti, have them hashtag or graffiti a picture. If you live in a region of the world where a certain celebration is important, then make sure to include cultural connections. If you are obliged to work with certain coursebooks but are not satisfied with them, you can cover the minimum by allowing for work via the choice board, or work with texts and transcripts in the

books more creatively than the books provide ideas for. You see this with Choice Board 2, about Pancake Day: there is a text in our local coursebook that students find relatively boring; thus, I chose a more interesting text, although this choice board would work just as well with the coursebook text.

Searching Google Images will turn up more ideas than you can imagine! Think about narrowing your search, for instance *+a topic (space) +an age (elementary school) +a focus (reading) +choice board*, and you will be inspired. I often take the ideas I find there and simplify the language or put a small example somewhere on the page or on the board for the learners to refer to.

Choosing to experiment with choice boards in your classroom can lead to many interesting discoveries. They will provide your learners with valuable skills, even if it does take a bit of time for them to learn to manage themselves in such an open situation—but that is one of the main aims of public education.

REFERENCES

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